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Seventy-second year

Provisional

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Wednesday, 30 August 2017, 10.30 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Aboulatta	(Egypt)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Llorentty Soliz
	China	Mr. Wu Haitao
	Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
	France	Mrs. Gueguen
	Italy	Mr. Cardi
	Japan	Mr. Bessho
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Tumysh
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Senegal	Mr. Seck
	Sweden	Mr. Skau
	Ukraine	Mr. Yelchenko
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Rycroft
	United States of America	Ms. Sison
	Uruguay	Mr. Rosselli

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/733)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.30 a.m.

The adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/733)

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, and Mr. Stephen O'Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

Mr. De Mistura is joining today's meeting via video-teleconference from Geneva.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2017/733, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016).

I now give the floor to Mr. De Mistura.

Mr. De Mistura: Let me say how pleased I am, Mr. President, that we have been able to hold this briefing before the end of your presidency. I wish a happy Eid to you and everyone around the world.

I last briefed the Security Council after the seventh round of the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva, which concluded on 14 July. Since then, we have been active in a range of diplomatic efforts and continuing contacts. I have recently held high-level consultations in Tehran and Paris, and my Deputy Special Envoy Ambassador Ramzy was earlier in Moscow and is currently in Saudi Arabia. Contacts are continuing with other actors as we seek to lay the ground for further rounds of talks that bring the parties into a genuine negotiation.

Let me elaborate on how I assess the situation at present, and what we think we can expect in the period ahead in de-escalating violence, in combating terrorism and in advancing the political process.

While undoubtedly there is still violence in Syria, the trend of de-escalation and the operationalization of de-escalation zones is indeed continuing. We are encouraged by the calm in the south-west and the opening of a trilateral Amman monitoring centre by the Russian Federation, the United States and Jordan. Meanwhile, following a series of agreements with armed groups, including with the active support of Egypt and the Russian Federation, we have seen a significant reduction of violence in parts of the Ghouta de-escalation zone, although not in all of it. In Homs, we note the Russian Federation's efforts to reach a ceasefire agreement are continuing. We are, however, worried about reports of shelling and air strikes north of Homs city, which we believe require the guarantors' urgent attention.

Meantime, the situation in Idlib is complex and complicated and needs close attention. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham — or as we all continue to call it, the former Al-Nusra, a terrorist group identified by the Council — has taken over territory from other armed opposition groups in this area. Its stated intention is to set up some kind of new Al-Nursa-dominated administration. It is very important that the Astana guarantors, in liaison with the Government and armed opposition groups, come to a speedy agreement to operationalize the de-escalation zone in Idlib. This will also require a very important element: protecting civilians, but that will be addressed, I am sure, by my colleague Stephen O'Brien.

As efforts to combat terrorism continue, we are seeing the areas of control of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)/Da'esh being constantly shrunk — something I think everyone welcomes in the ongoing fight against terrorism. While the Government of Syria is proceeding towards Deir ez-Zor, the Lebanese army has advanced against ISIL/Da'esh on the Lebanese side of the border. The Syrian Democratic Forces and the United States-led coalition continue their efforts to eliminate ISIL from Raqqa, while the Russian Federation is supporting the Government of Syria in proceeding towards Deir ez-Zor. While military operations are under way, rapid, safe and sustained humanitarian access remains essential, as well as the work for the release of the arbitrarily detained persons and at least the shedding of light on the fate of the thousands of disappeared.

All parties must also do their utmost to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure while this is

happening. As I said, I am sure my colleague and friend, Under-Secretary-General O'Brien — who I would like personally, since this is my last opportunity to do so, to thank him publicly for his immense efforts on Syria — will further address these issues in his briefing on the humanitarian aspects. I also want to thank publicly the United Nations Mine Action Service for its continued readiness to support humanitarian demining efforts in Syria.

The developments I have described are the result of a very timely process of prioritization and cooperation among key external players, and a realization among internal players of the need to compromise. The challenge ahead will be to extend this spirit into the political realm. This requires clear and new thinking from the opposition and the Government, and enhanced international cooperation.

Let me start with the opposition. The opposition people and representatives who have been invited to the Geneva talks — the High Negotiations Committee, the Cairo platform and the Moscow platform, those which have been specified by name in resolution 2254 (2015) — have important and urgent work to do to develop common negotiating positions and strengthen their own unity. It is high time for that. I briefed the Council last time (see S/PV.7983) on the progress we have made with them in two rounds of United Nations technical talks in Geneva and nearby, at which we saw a lot of important substantive progress. There is not that much distance between them, except on one or two crucial points. That substantive progress should now be used as a springboard for further efforts.

Given that many developments and intense discussions are taking place elsewhere between the actors of the opposition, we have refrained from holding further United Nations technical talks in order to give time for these developments to unfold and progress. But time must not be lost. Elevating common technical commonalities to the political level remains an imperative. They have agreed at least on the technical commonalities. Now we need to bring them to a higher level.

I am grateful to Saudi Arabia for taking the initiative to convene a new, more inclusive meeting of the opposition — a Riyadh 2 conference as it is called, including with the hosting of a preparatory meeting last week. Our technical work and political support will be important contributions to those efforts. We will work closely with Saudi Arabia and all who have traditionally supported or engaged with the opposition in this pursuit. I recall in this respect that resolution 2254 (2015) encourages me to be active in any finalization effort in this regard.

As we counsel fresh thinking and initiatives on the part of the opposition, we may also need urgently to do the same with the Government. The Government has indicated that it would be prepared to intensify its engagement with a unified opposition and with clarity on principles that govern the political process. But there are times when strong public signals are sent that indicate an exclusively military approach, and a dismissal of the prospects of any meaningful political negotiation.

However, we have seen too many instances in other conflicts where, despite military advances, a Government has not able to turn those gains into a sustainable post-conflict situation, due to unmet political grievance and lack of genuine inclusion of all in the future of the country. That is why we are convinced that both the opposition and the Government have, or should have, a genuine interest now in actually engaging in serious discussions. Ultimately, it will only be Syrians who determine the future of their country — we know that — but an internationally supported and inclusive political process will be required to lay the foundation for a sustainable future and for genuine reconstruction. It is in the profound interests of the long-suffering people of Syria that the Government and the opposition realize that the time has come to engage in more serious and concrete negotiations.

In this regard, I would like to note that we are not only focused on the Government and opposition, but are listening to the full range of Syrian stakeholders. Immediately after the seventh round of our own talks, our own Office related to the Civil Society Support Room completed regional consultations in Beirut, Gaziantep and Amman. This discussion involved over 120 civil-society actors and networks, establishing the foundation for future consultations in Geneva. It is becoming increasingly clear from these consultations that regardless of their perceived differences — and they do have differences — all Syrians are impatient for the conflict to end and the political process to deliver. We will continue to encourage and facilitate their collective work.

Let me also update the Council on the Syrian Women's Advisory Board. Following its regular contributions to the work that was done during the seventh round of intra-Syrian talks, the 12-member board is now currently undergoing a rotation exercise to ensure continuous diversity of perspectives. I count on the continued support of the Women's Advisory Board to advise me and my team to ensure the meaningful representation of diverse women's voices and women's rights perspectives in the political process as we move forward. We hope to see the same in the delegations of both the opposition and the Government.

So how do we now bring all this activity together into one common effort in the coming months to genuinely advance a political solution? What is the path forward?

First, Russia, Iran, Turkey and others — including the United States of America, Egypt and Jordan — will need to keep working actively, as they have been doing, on de-escalation. The next Astana meeting, now scheduled for 14 and 15 September — and related meetings elsewhere, both in Geneva and Amman, as we have seen — should help to address these matters, and I and my team will be there, in Astana, to help.

Secondly, it will be important for Saudi Arabia and all who have influence with the opposition to focus, as they are currently doing, on a single plan to foster the cohesion and realism of the opposition. On our side, we shall be actively involved in those efforts as well, while, let me reiterate, my own Office stands ready to convene further technical talks to support what Saudi Arabia has been trying to do in unifying the opposition.

Thirdly, it will be vital for those with influence on the Government of Syria to assess the situation carefully and signal a genuine readiness for dialogue and inclusion on the political future of Syria.

Fourthly, I appreciate the continued engagement and support of the European Union and view the meeting it intends to host during the opening of the seventy-second session of the General Assembly as an opportunity to address future resilience and stabilization efforts and support the humanitarian needs of civilians.

Bearing all of this mind, it is my intention to reconvene the formal intra-Syrian talks in Geneva later in October. In this way, we are giving time for the dynamics I have just described to reach a further stage of maturity. It is my hope that both the Syrian Government and the opposition will come to Geneva then to engage in formal negotiations.

This is a time for realism and focus, for shifting from the logic of war to that of negotiation, and for putting the interests of the Syrian people first. If I could identify one thing above all that can make a difference, it would be a sense of unity of purpose internationally with clear priorities and common goals. We need therefore to find creative ways to proceed along the path of peace that the Security Council, through resolution 2254 (2015), has long sought to advance. With that, and our common encouragement to the Syrians in this regard, we can make a real difference in this tragic conflict.

I also look forward to the occasion of the forthcoming opening of the seventy-second session of the General Assembly to see further opportunities and initiatives related to an accelerated political process on Syria. I would like to summarize the foregoing so that we have some points on our radar screens that may help us to focus.

First, we have had today's Security Council meeting, and the Council will hold its own deliberations. Next, the Astana meeting is due to take place, and we want it to succeed and look at additional de-escalation areas. Then there is the opportunity that all of us, including Council members, will have at the opening of the seventy-second session of the General Assembly to promote and push for discussions and initiatives related to accelerating the political process on Syria. Then, in October, we hope to see and we will be working and pushing for the Riyadh II meeting to contribute to producing a common platform among the opposition parties, hoping meanwhile that the Government will be helped also to realize that there is now a need for a genuine political concrete negotiation.

Meanwhile, hoping, if I may use that word in relation to Eid — insha'Allah — that Deir ez-Zor and Al-Raqqa get closer to being liberated, we urge that a sustainable political solution be found so that Da'esh will not and should not reappear like it did in Iraq. In late October, there will be talks in Geneva. This time we hope to see serious and concrete talks. We are planning for two weeks back to back.

The foregoing is basically what we are seeing on our radar screens. Things may happen to move in that direction or to stop moving in that direction, to complicate the movement or to move forward, but we need to have a common vision.

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank Mr. De Mistura for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: I wish an Eid Mubarak to you, Mr. President, and to all.

I would like to start by thanking my good friend and indeed my colleague, Special Representative and Envoy, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, for all his tireless, unstinting determination and skill in seeking to find a way forward, above all, for the Syrian people who have suffered so long.

In the violent, brutal chaotic world we live in today, it is a sad, tragic and blunt truth that on this, my last appearance in this role in this Chamber, the Security Council, the highest body in the world charged with preventing and resolving wars, conflicts and the desperate human death, pain and suffering directed caused by war and conflict, I am still urging its members, in the name of our common humanity, to find a way to stop the Syrian people from paying the price of political failure.

Syria is a conflict with an atrocious, incalculable human cost, one that has forced us to see the very worst of human behaviour. It is a conflict that as a consequence has consumed all of us without respite for seven bloody years. When we pause to think even for a moment that I say this knowing the sheer scale of the needless man-made, violent, deliberate humanitarian horror that has made 21 million Yemenis a sad lot today, or the desperation with which Somalia, South Sudan and north-eastern Nigeria, with the brave help of humanitarian workers, are trying to avert famine for 20 million of our fellow global citizens, or the 142 million people in 40 countries who need us tonight, or the fact that month after month the unremitting fearful plight of the Syrian people sears into our hearts and outrages and torments our minds, I am bound to reflect: "surely we can do better".

Some 27 reports of the Secretary-General on the Syrian crisis have been submitted to the Security Council since I took up this Office in June 2015, and countless briefings presented both in this open Chamber and in private consultations — in 27 months, a record 55 consultations, to be accurate, 30 on Syria alone.

The Security Council is fully on notice and has heard in minute detail about the crisis as the deadliest years of the Syrian conflict has unfolded. We are all witnesses to the destruction of a country, its people, its children and its future. We have endured the sight of people dying of starvation or a child drowning and washed up on the beach in his family's desperate, dangerous bid to escape the scandalous ravages of Syria then, which continue today; pictures of emaciated starving children in the besieged town of Madaya; and harrowing images of bombs and mortars raining down on schools, medical facilities and internally displaced settlements — where there are meant to be sanctuaries — on public markets and, yes, on those trying to bring the citizens of Syria hope and support: humanitarian and health workers and aid convoys.

We watched the parties cynically, methodically, take out every single medical facility in eastern Aleppo, one by one, day after day, with babies dying in their incubators due to oxygen interruptions following such attacks. We have all been shocked by reports of double-tap attacks, where a helicopter or a jet bombs a building, then waits, just long enough, for rescue and medical workers to arrive before attacking again. We witnessed nothing less than an all-out effort by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to impose a new Dark Age. We were at a loss for words at reports of Yazidi girls scratching their faces out of fear of being bought and sexually enslaved, and of reports of men being thrown of tower blocks for being gay — and then being stoned to death, even after surviving the fall. Just last week, we were reminded of the biggest chemical attack in Syria's war, which hit the sieged eastern Ghouta four years ago.

Meeting after meeting, therefore, we have detailed this destruction, and yet failed to see accountability for any of the countless war crimes and crimes against humanity committed on the ground. As I leave the United Nations, despite every humanitarian's best efforts in the United Nations and beyond, none of us can escape a share in the shame that collectively we have not put a stop to this despite at least 300,000, even maybe 500,000, Syrians now killed, let alone the millions injured, displaced or who have fled, petrified.

I call again, one final time, as the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator, for members of the Council to urgently refer the situation and the people responsible for it in Syria to the International Criminal Court. I also call on Member States to fully support the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism and ask, once more, the Syrian authorities to finally grant access to the Independent International

Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. To fail to do this simply reinforces impunity and encourages the perpetrators, whoever they are, to feel unthreatened and undeterred from their malevolent, dastardly inhuman actions.

Over the month of July and into August, however hideous it remains in so many parts of Syria, to remain true to the facts, I am the first to be glad to report that we continue to see a reduction in violence in some areas of the country following the 4 May Astana memorandum on de-escalation. Of course, I welcome that. The impact of this conflict on the basic needs and dignity of ordinary Syrians every day is clear, and efforts to push the so-called ISIL out of its strongholds continue to come with a terrible cost of killing, injuring and displacing scores of civilians.

In Raqqa governorate, and since the beginning of the Euphrates Wrath Operation in November last year, over 271,00 men, women and children — including an estimated 75,000 people from Raqqa city — have been displaced from their homes to other locations within the governorate, as well as to Hassakeh, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor and Hama governorates. That comes on the heels of an increasing number of reported civilian casualties as military operations, including air strikes, are intensifying as the area that the so-called ISIL holds shrinks. Last week alone, reports indicated that over 30 civilians were killed in the Al-Sakhani neighbourhood, while eight people from the same family lost their lives in a separate attack in another part of the city.

Just days before, dozens more had reportedly been killed and injured in Raqqa city due to airstrikes and shelling. The United Nations estimates that an average of 27 people are being killed in Raqqa every day. Up to 25,000 civilians still remain trapped in the city and are increasingly exposed to the crossfire of the ongoing fighting. They risk being killed, either by airstrikes or by ISIL snipers or mines if they try to flee, or of being used as human shields if they remain. Can you imagine being faced with that choice, clinging to your young child's hand? It is a clear clarion call: in line with international humanitarian law, the safety of those trying to flee must be guaranteed, without excessive screenings or restrictions on movement. Nothing is more important than protecting civilians during this conflict; that has always been the case.

Be in no doubt: the heinous fault lies with the fighters and their masters on every side. But the international community cannot hold its head up high when it comes to protection. Again, I therefore urge all parties fighting in Raqqa and across Syria to take every possible measure, however difficult and constraining they may feel it is on their military action, to spare and protect civilians and civilian infrastructure in ever-increasing urban settings, which compounds the mortal risk to the innocents — as required under the obligations they freely entered into under international humanitarian law, are bound by and to which they have to be held to account.

Further to the south in Syria, the security and protection of an estimated 4,000 Syrians in Hadalat and 45,000 Syrians in Rukban — mainly women and children — who remain stranded at the berm along Syria's border with Jordan, continue to deteriorate. Airstrikes have been reported in the area in recent weeks, causing serious distress and panic among this already displaced, very vulnerable population, stuck in barren desert, fearing for their lives. The establishment of a Government of Syria-controlled corridor from Damascus to Iraq, north of the berm, has effectively trapped the population, restricting the movement of both people and goods to the area. Military action has intensified, thereby heightening levels of insecurity and exposing the civilian population in both Hadalat and Rukban settlements to massively greater and graver risks. Moreover, the last cycle of distribution of humanitarian assistance was halted on 15 June, and we urgently seek the resumption of the distribution of lifesaving assistance. I visited Jordan multiple times, where I had positive discussions with the authorities on the berm, and appreciated their continued engagement to see that those at the berm receive the support they so desperately need. Under today's new threat, their best chance is to be allowed to go, even if temporarily, into Jordan.

Back in the north of Syria, in Idlib, the situation of displaced people in the governorate remains a cause of deep foreboding. As local agreements continue to be reached with various non-State armed grouped across Syria and in neighouring Lebanon — agreements that I am bound to say are not in line with international standards or humanitarian principles and often force civilians to choose between remaining and fearing for their safety, or evacuating to insecure areas they have never been to — 1 million people have now been displaced to the governorate. Even though airstrikes have diminished at least somewhat since the de-escalation

memorandum was signed in May, the situation remains perilous for those displaced who arrive into an area unable to cope with such voluminous movement.

It is the heroic work of our partners from non-governmental organizations (NGO), who provide the main part of the response to Idlib cross-border from Turkey, that is responsible for keeping people alive. That has been challenged, however, as the former Al-Nusra Front — as Mr. De Mistura said, a proscribed terrorist organization, along with the so-called ISIL, on the Security Council sanctions list group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham — have been battling against other opposition groups for control of parts of Idlib. The insecurity during fighting forced some NGOs to stop their work temporarily.

I am gravely concerned with the current brutal push by Al-Nusra to control local councils and other important institutions. I call on all parties to respect humanitarian principles and ensure the independence of those who are providing humanitarian assistance. As Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura has said, in Idlib protection is key. And international humanitarian law apply to all parties, not just States — vitally important as that is in Syria as elsewhere — it also applies to all fighters, factions, movements and non-State actors everywhere. It applies to them all, to us all. That is what my colleagues in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights need, and must be allowed, to do: gather, preserve, document and, one day, present such evidence to an appropriate, accountable tribunal in order to ensure that impunity is banished.

Let me now turn to inter-agency operations aimed at besieged and hard-to-reach locations. On 19 July, the United Nations submitted its August and September inter-agency convoy plan to the Syrian authorities, which seeks to reach 1,231,000 people across 36 locations. In their response, received on 3 August following subsequent United Nations efforts to clarify, the Syrian authorities affirmed that the United Nations and its partners could deliver multi-sectoral assistance to 1,638,114 people. The authorities clarified, and even increased, the number of beneficiaries — owing, in part at least, to persistent United Nations engagement — and authorized more people than requested for seven locations. That is welcome news. But the key now is to turn those requests and approvals for outreach to besieged and hard-to-reach locations into actual deliveries to Syrians in need. The team on the ground is working day and night to make that a reality, including negotiating with the Syrian authorities to turn partial approvals into full approvals and — let me stress, with all the force at my command — to put an end to the removal of medical supplies, which continues.

It has finally been accepted that birthing kits are not hostile weapons. What is in the minds of the brutes who remove such items, and of the people at the highest levels in the Syrian Government who order that to happen? No wonder they have not allowed me back into Syria since December 2015. Speaking truth to power only hurts when the truth is shameful.

So far this month, humanitarian convoys have delivered desperately needed lifesaving assistance to the besieged towns of Douma, in rural Damascus, and Barzeh. In total, 55,000 people in besieged locations have received assistance: 35,000 people in Douma on 17 August were provided with multisectoral assistance, and 20,000 people in Barzeh received food and nutrition assistance on 26 August. The delivery to Douma was notable in that it was the first convoy to proceed into eastern Ghouta since the deployment of Russian military police to the area as part of the de-escalation area initiative. In addition, two inter-agency convoys delivered lifesaving assistance to the area around northern rural Hims, one to the hard-to-reach towns of Talbiseh and Tlul Elhomor on 19 August, and a second to Al-Rastan on 27 August. In total, 191,500 people in need were provided with multisectoral assistance.

I am the first to acknowledge, as demonstrated by concurrent developments in Astana, Amman and Cairo in recent months, that there remain persistent and determined efforts to reduce violence through de-escalation agreements. I welcome those efforts, and I hope the Astana guarantors will soon be able to finalize the remaining operational and technical modalities for all de-escalation areas and for promoting confidence-building measures regarding the issues of detainees, abductees and missing persons and humanitarian demining. I urge all parties to work together to consolidate and expand those ceasefires. I also wish to reiterate that any reduction in hostilities must also generate concrete results for the safe, unimpeded and sustained freedom of movement and humanitarian access by the United Nations and our partners in full conformity with international humanitarian law, that is, in accordance with the principles of impartiality, independence and neutrality, in order to relieve the suffering and meet humanitarian needs wherever they

arise, and where we determine the beneficiaries, the quantities and what is needed.

Access to areas identified for de-escalation, and to many other areas across Syria where needs remain high, still falls short of what is required. In particular, in areas where there has been a decrease in fighting there is no excuse for any side to restrict access. And let me say it loud and clear yet again: humanitarian and health workers are not a target.

I would like to reiterate our impartial appreciation to the Russian Federation and to voice our support for its initiative, presented in the Council on 9 August, aimed at scaling up humanitarian operations in de-escalation areas. Be assured that the United Nations and its humanitarian partners have been actively working on preparedness planning and remain committed to scaling up operations and providing lifesaving assistance to men, women and children in need in the de-escalation areas and throughout the country, despite the challenging and dangerous operational environment on the ground.

In recent days, the deployment of convoys to Douma, Barzeh, Al-Rastan, Talbiseh and Tlul Elhomor has shown that, when there is sufficient political will, with the active engagement of the Russian Federation and other Member States, access to besieged and hard-to-reach locations is possible. That said — and I cannot stress this point strongly enough — the only way of guaranteeing that the Russian initiative will be a continuing success is by ensuring that administrative delays on the part of the Government of Syria are lifted once and for all.

We cannot keep waiting for the signing of the necessary facilitation letters. Give us the letters, and we will deploy. In fact, every month thousands of facilitation letters have been readily signed for regular programmes in Government-controlled areas — the vast majority of those that have been requested. Yet for access to cross-line areas, only a small percentage of those areas approved by the Government actually receive facilitation letters. Of course, that is not right. It is outrageous and morally reprehensible, let alone in breach of international humanitarian law. That must change — and now. Non-State armed groups must also provide the necessary security guarantees in an equally timely manner. Otherwise, despite our very best intentions, we will not be able to noticeably increase our deliveries to areas where violence has ceased through the de-escalation agreements. It is as simple as that.

I must also share my frustrations about the little progress made in recent months in responding to the needs of the many thousands of people still besieged in Fo'ah, Kafraya and Yarmouk. Following months of difficult negotiations, we were informed in mid-August that an agreement had finally been reached between the various parties for aid distributions to take place simultaneously in those three locations. We loaded our trucks on 17 August, only to off-load them again a week later, on 23 August — the day on which we were informed that the agreement was no more. That is disgusting. It is scandalous and an outrage, and I urge all Member States, in particular those with influence, to do all they can to bring the parties to their senses. I am told that a new agreement among the parties was apparently reached on 27 August, but where is the evidence? I have to be hopeful that this time we will succeed in getting through. Thousands of people, for the most part women and children, depend upon our collective action.

As I draw to a close, let highlight a vital point. Ten days ago we commemorated World Humanitarian Day, where we took time to pay tribute to all the brave women and men who have died in humanitarian service, in Syria and around the world. Let us together honour them here today, as well as those who continue to risk their lives every day in Syria and elsewhere in their quest to help others. Let us also stand in solidarity with the millions of civilians in Syria whose lives have been destroyed by the conflict, their dignity obliterated, their loved ones killed, their towns reduced to rubble, their hope for the future shattered. We stand in solidarity with them to send a clear message to the world: civilians, humanitarians and health workers, wherever they are, are not a target.

As I take my leave, despite all the grave humanitarian challenges being faced by our fellow human beings today in over 40 countries, I remain inspired and eternally grateful for the selfless, skilled, persistent, brave and courageous work of the humanitarian and health workers around the world — in the field as well as those running organizations and coordinating, be they in the United Nations or in international and local non-governmental organizations and partners. They have worked to save millions of lives and, in today's world of overwhelmingly protracted, man-made

and avoidable conflict settings, to protect civilians wherever possible.

Yes, we have to have safe, unimpeded access and the absolute right to principled humanitarian relief through action in line with international humanitarian law to meet the needs of the vulnerable. And yes, we will need more and more of the continuing generosity of an ever-broadening number of donors of financial resources. And yes, that is best done, for the scale necessary to meet the exponentially rising demand, through coordinated United Nations and multilateral channels, as fully endorsed at the World Humanitarian Summit.

I leave with a heavy heart, however. As I survey this famous horseshoe table, I see the 15 members of the Security Council who represent the world's hopes for peace and security and are charged, even while representing their own capitals and their respective, competing perspectives, with rising above those separate interests to reach the collective responsibility for the interests of all the peoples of the world by recognizing and acting to put our common humanity and our responsibility to our fellow global citizens first — their lives and their protection — that is the humanitarian imperative. That is our and Council members' collective responsibility and collective accountability.

In Syria, Yemen, or the countless other areas where we encounter the desperate man-made humanitarian needs of people caught up in conflict crises, surely what divides members in the Council cannot be more important than what must unite them and us all — our common humanity and our goal of relieving the suffering of the world's most vulnerable. We must give hope and a future to those women, men, elderly, sick and the children — the young girls and boys — caught up in crises, who deserve no less of a life than each member sitting around this horseshoe table.

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank Mr. O'Brien for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those Council members who wish to make statements.

Mr. Rosselli (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): During the past 20 months as a non-permanent member of the Security Council, I believe that I have already said on other occasions that it is always difficult to listen to the words of Mr. Stephen O'Brien because he confronts us with the uncomfortable reality of the horrors of war with absolute and uncompromising frankness.

The Charter of the United Nations refers to the "scourge of war", and that scourge is represented to us in what Mr. O'Brien has shown us, regrettably not just this month but continuously, as he has briefed the Council with compassion, conviction and in a direct and frank manner — and I should say that he has been brutally frank. Although during the past 20 months I have learned to appreciate each of his briefings, however frank they have been, they do not leave us feeling very much at ease, because ultimately they confront us with our failures and our inability to effectively contribute to stopping the horrors in Syria in an effective and swift manner, as is the case today. As Mr. O'Brien leaves us, he also leaves us with a major life lesson and has set the bar very high for his successor. On behalf of my Government, I wish him every success in his future endeavours.

I should also like to take this opportunity to thank our tireless friend Staffan de Mistura, whom we have long admired for his unyielding optimism. He is determined and continues to do all that he can to carve out spaces and forums in which an agreement can be forged regarding the situation in Syria. He is struggling in the worst of all situations, which is to a great extent the result of the absolute lack of political commitment on the part of all the opposition groups in Syria, which, through their disunion and lack of common interests, makes it very difficult for them to come to the negotiation table, because the same groups appear very far from finding the necessary common front to begin serious negotiations. Once again, we extend to Staffan de Mistura and his entire team our gratitude and prayers that he will never let up.

Since Uruguay took up its mandate as a non-permanent member of the Council 20 months ago, we have focused our work on the protection of civilians and international humanitarian law, and have continuously worked to prevent efforts to hinder the access to and distribution of aid, while demanding the protection and safety of humanitarian workers in carrying out their work.

Stephen O'Brien recalled that only a few days ago, we commemorated World Humanitarian Day, and my delegation recognized the hard work and personal sacrifice of every one of the thousands of humanitarian workers throughout the world, who, on a daily basis, put their lives at risk to help those most in need in the interests of peace and a more humane world. The case of Syria is the best example of that today.

We therefore vigorously reject the unfounded accusations made by the Syrian delegation against the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) during our meeting on this agenda item (see S/PV.8015) in July. We firmly attest to the absolutely professional, impartial and depoliticized attitude of OCHA in Syria and wherever else it carries out its work, and we reiterate the full support of Uruguay for the Office. At this point in time, with the transition of leadership in the Office, we believe that Damascus should make the positive gesture of inviting its new Director to visit Syria, which could lead to a fluid relationship, thereby allowing for the regular delivery of humanitarian aid.

The Astana process and other initiatives launched over the past months aimed at bringing about a cessation of local hostilities have led to a significant reduction in the violence in the country. We stress that it is truly important that those areas maintain a transitional status with a view to maintaining for the future the unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. We must, however, express our concern that for four consecutive months we have not received any information regarding the implementation of the memorandum of 4 May, particularly since, to date, unrestricted access has not been provided to the United Nations or to groups seeking to distribute humanitarian assistance to those areas. Stephen O'Brien mentioned the work carried out with the Russian Federation over the past days, but it is also necessary to ensure the unrestricted access of the United Nations to those areas.

That should provide assurances that the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law, including the prohibition of forced displacement and the freedom of movement to enter and leave voluntarily those territories, will be respected. Regrettably, aid deliveries are increasingly being discontinued, thereby preventing the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs from being able to discharge its work. The ongoing fighting, security issues and — what is even more incomprehensible — the lack of authorizations and the bureaucratic obstacles imposed by the Syrian Government prevent humanitarian aid from being delivered to those who need it.

As we have already said on previous occasions, that is not a failure on the part of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, but of the Security Council and of the Member States with influence over the parties. Thus far we have not been able to persuade all the various actors in the Syrian conflict to allow regular access to convoys with humanitarian aid. To date, all parties to the conflict in Syria have consistently ignored and violated that basic principle of international law. For that reason, Uruguay supported the establishment of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, including those that constitute war crimes, such as the use of chemical weapons against civilians.

Providing justice to the hundreds of thousands of innocent victims of that conflict will be essential for lasting peace in Syria and for that country and its entire population to overcome the horrors of the protracted war. It will also have a persuasive effect for the future. On a related note, we also support the Secretary-General's request that incidents in Syria be referred to, and considered by, the International Criminal Court.

The priorities in Syria have been clearly defined — achieving a political settlement that can end the war and pave the way for a peaceful political transition; consolidating local ceasefires; and ensuring humanitarian access to the millions of people in need in areas that are besieged or hard to reach.

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 11.20 a.m.